

The Road To Hell: The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity

By Michael Maren. New York: Free Press, 1997, 302 pp.

How many of us have ever reflected on the work of the charity business? Other than the few odd cases of corruption, the really big players such as Save the Children earn our uncritical respect and admiration for their seemingly selfless work. We have no qualms about pulling out our wallets and donating generously to what we think are worthy projects, worthy people, and worthy non-profit, apolitical organizations whose only aims are to sponsor orphans, build wells, improve irrigation, provide food and shelter (especially at the time of major disasters and famines), and labor ceaselessly to improve the lot of the poor, destitute, and impoverished living in the Third World and Africa, especially Africa.

Read these objectives again, for drawing on his experience of over nineteen years of work with aid organizations around Africa, Michael Maren has written a book that demolishes each and every one of them. Probing deep into the workings of these inviolable institutions, such as CARE, USAID, Save the Children, and UNHCR, he highlights an utterly seamy side: a spectacular waste of funds, a fraudulent record of accounts, sensational salaries and lifestyles of the directors, a complete disregard for the recipients or their children, and the creation and funding of "projects" that are so badly managed and so utterly unsuited to the geography of the country and needs of the people that they often do far more harm than good, leaving the recipients in a worse state than when they found them. It is a simple fact of life in the aid business that with appropriate media hype, famines, dramatic influxes of refugees, floods, earthquakes, and other such catastrophes can be real money-spinners. It is in this light and with these results that Maren has chosen to title the book *The Road to Hell*.

The book is broadly set against the backdrop of Somalia and its civil strife and military tensions with Ethiopia. Witnessing a series of harrowing wars, famines, and natural disasters, Maren tells how CARE unwittingly assisted a Somalian dictatorship in building a political and economic power base; how the UN, Save the Children, and many other nongovernmental organizations provided raw materials for ethnic factions who subsequently threatened genocidal massacres in Rwanda and Burundi. He brings first-hand reports of African farmers, Western aid workers, and corrupt politicians from many countries, joined together in a vicious circle of self-interest. Above all, he heralds an important truth: Humanitarian intervention and foreign activity is necessarily political. It gets hijacked by powerful charities and agricultural interests and is cynically manipulated by local strongmen to control rebellious populations.

One interesting feature of the aid business that Maren examines is the fact that it is perhaps the last visible vehicle or characteristic of colonialism left in the Third World. He does not fail to emphasize that states are not moral agents and that admiration for their altruism is misplaced, for it is simply a call for reimposition of colonial benevolence by the "civilized world" which feels it must go out to these desperate places and govern through food aid and agricultural programs. This "white man's burden" attitude, however, must be juxtaposed against political motives, for as Maren points out, great power aid programs like USAID continue to be motivated primarily by the political and economic interests of the donors. This colonialist outlook is most visible, argues Maren, in the behavior

and lifestyle of the comparatively rich (compared to their Third World counterparts) aid workers who go out to help. Maren illustrates how a pseudo colonial world is created through the establishment of a string of clean, well stocked, leisure clubs where the aid workers spend most of their time socializing instead of working and a set of guarded compounds where they choose to live complete with all modern conveniences such as refrigerators, TVs, and videos. Indeed, he argues, they have an utter lack of knowledge of the culture or language of the people they have come to help, and not understanding the sociocultural environment around them, they often harbor deep suspicions and fears, fueling their unwillingness to mix with the natives around them.

Maren contends that this is a serious flaw, for whether aid is charitable or official, whether funded out of direct public donations or out of taxes, the employees of all the agencies concerned inevitably play a crucial role in the field and bear a tremendous responsibility. As such, they must interpret the needs of the poor, and they must meet those needs quickly and competently especially during times of famine and natural disasters. Although it is generally taken for granted that they do both these things and do them well, Maren points out that this is often far from the case. Quoting from the mouths of frustrated recipients themselves, he illustrates how foreign experts and aid workers are spectacularly ill equipped, both technically and academically, to handle the situations they find themselves in and end up doing far more harm than good, wasting a great deal of resources in the process. Why, he laments, use foreign, expensive experts who have no idea of the terrain they have flown into or the people they have come to help, when indigenous experts, who know the needs of their own country and people better than anyone, are on hand to supply all the help, skill, and information needed? In many Third World countries a great deal of aid money is spent purchasing the expertise that Americans and Europeans provide. Maren writes of how different agencies using different methods of calculating operating, logistics, and miscellaneous costs in financing a project come up with hugely inflated figures which, once the funds are received, are immediately consumed in such wasteful costs as expert's salaries, modern jeeps, and expensive technical equipment where, for instance, a hand plow would do. This means that little of the original amount actually figures in tangible help for the victims.

Expatriates in Mogadishu invested vast amounts of their time and energy trying to live as normal a Western lifestyle as possible, which usually meant procuring food items that were not available in the local markets: fatty American beef, chocolate, butter. (p. 38)

Through his experiences in Africa (especially Somalia and, as mentioned earlier, its military tensions with Ethiopia), Maren points out that traditional food and development strategies have a fatal flaw, the assumption that the world is a harmonious place and that people in power are altruistic. In reality, this is not the case. The Third World is governed by elites whose wealth and power are invariably increased by aid programs and who are not about to share these with their less privileged neighbors. One of the great problems in reaching actual poor and hungry people is the ability of elites to corner most of the benefits of aid. Maren routinely found food being stolen and then sold on the black market bringing wealth to the corrupt elites and politicians. Conversely, he also saw much food aid being given to those who would be politically useful to the government, factions who could be counted on to return the favor in military support if and when the need arose.

Perhaps most sadly of all, Maren saw how food, much like drugs, created a climate of dependency among people, ruining local populations whose food habits would be changed irrevocably and whose young were forgetting traditional methods of agriculture and nomadic ways of life to the extent that they would have a hard time surviving if the food were withdrawn. To make matters worse, the actual donors were not concerned with the effectiveness of distribution and did not bother with effective surveillance programs. Maren was shocked to learn of the shabby and inaccurate reports that would be written to justify spending programs and how the prime objective of the aid organizations was to raise money (with fat salaries for the directors and staff) and not alleviate the suffering of the recipients or to care that it reached those who really needed it.

Maren claims that any aid worker who questioned the goals or methods was deemed a trouble maker and, if he did not quickly learn to toe the line, he was asked to leave. Much of the first part of the book is devoted to the real life experiences of a brilliant, passionate, and highly qualified (in terms of all the relevant skills needed) aid worker named Chris Cassidy who tried to change the system and bring real and meaningful aid to the people he had come to help. Cassidy lived among the natives in a squalid hut, learned their language and culture, and did not barricade himself behind high compound walls. The rewards for his "troublemaking" with charity officials, corrupt elites, and workers were the murder of his young son, divorce, and dismissal from the charity he was working with.

Vital resources, contends Maren, are also used in expensive public relations campaigns to raise funds. One particular approach, which he refers to as widely used, is the so-called sponsor-a-child/orphan fund. It has been a highly successful advertising campaign tactic, netting a vast amount of funds for the various aid organizations employing it. The idea is that a donor from the West is usually given a child to sponsor so that his donations are directed to a specific child in return for which he receives periodic photographs and letters from the child sponsored. Maren points out that this is a highly abused source of revenue for the aid agencies as the logistics alone are so great that, as he claims, aid organizations do not bother sending specific funds to specific children who in actual fact see very little of this money and indeed in a large majority of cases none of it at all! Periodically the children are given pre-written, standard letters to copy and sign and once a year a party and/or items such as shoes as a token donation for their sponsorship; in other words, nothing that meets their actual needs. Indeed, Maren paints a lurid account of aid representatives prowling Third World villages in search of needy children and orphans, seducing and encouraging them to enter these programs, knowing the valuable revenue that each child will bring to the organization.

Aid does have its defenders, not least, as Maren illustrates, the highly paid public-relations men and women who spend millions of dollars a year through advertising campaigns justifying the continued existence of the agencies that employ them. They argue with passion that despite some regrettable failures and glitches, aid is justified by its successes and that eventually it does work. This, contends Maren, like the sponsor-a-child advertising campaign, is an appeal to the heartstrings, not to reason. This attitude patronizes and undervalues the people of the poor countries concerned. Indeed, as Maren points out, throughout history all countries, including "drought stricken" Africa, have survived perfectly well without any aid at all. The largely nomadic tribes of Africa under-

stood the nature of their land absolutely and as such had a system of grazing and a network of wells that them to exist well over the centuries; indeed, they measured their wealth more by the plentiful supply of their cattle than agricultural produce as it was more highly looked upon to roam and live off the land rather than to grow food on it (a cultural trait little known by the aid agencies and the West in general). Now we are suddenly told that large numbers of the same countries have lost the ability to survive unless they continue to receive ever larger amounts of aid. However, as the crux of Maren's book shows, the sad reality is that most poor people, in most poor countries, most of the time, never receive or even make contact with aid in any tangible shape or form. After the multibillion-dollar financial flows involved have been shaken through the sieve of over priced and irrelevant goods that must be bought in the donor countries, filtered again in the deep pockets of hundreds of thousands of foreign experts and aid agency staff, skimmed off by dishonest commission agents, and stolen by corrupt ministers and presidents, there is really very little left to go around. This little is, furthermore, then used thoughtlessly, or maliciously, or irresponsibly by those in power—who have no mandate from the poor, who do not consult with them, and who are indifferent to their fate. Is it any wonder then that Michael Maren has subtitled the book *The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity*.

The starving African exists as a point in space from which we measure our own wealth, success, and prosperity, a darkness against which we can view our own cultural triumphs. And he serves as a handy object of our charity. He is evidence that we have been blessed, and we have an obligation to spread that blessing. The belief that we can help is an affirmation of our own worth in the grand scheme of things. The starving African transcends the dull reality of whether or not anyone is actually starving in Africa. Starvation clearly delineates us from them. Sometimes it appears that the only time Africans are portrayed with dignity is when they're helpless and brave at the same time. A person about to starve to death develops a stoic strength. Journalists write about the quiet dignity of the hopelessly dying. If the Africans were merely hungry and poor, begging or conning coins on the streets of Nairobi or Addis Ababa, we might become annoyed and brush them aside—and most aid workers have done that at one time. When they steal tape decks from our Land Cruisers we feel anger and disgust. It is only in their weakness, when their death is inevitable, that we are touched. And it is in their helplessness that they become a marketable commodity. (p. 3)

This powerful critique makes an important contribution to our understanding of the political and economic realities of the aid business today. There is much that can be learned from it. It would also be useful if the book is read in conjunction with Graham Hancock's *Lords of Poverty* published by Mandarin (1993), which, complete with photographs, goes into a deeper analysis of the "projects" funded and the actual goods donated to a country, i.e., dangerous medicines not marketable back home, rotting food, and a mountain of shoes for the alleviation of poverty!

Shiraz Khan
Researcher
IIIT, London Office